

AUTOMATIC ACTION IN PLOTINUS

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1. Introduction

SEVERAL Plotinus scholars have recently called attention to a kind of action in the sensible world, which one could call ‘spontaneous’ or ‘automatic’ action, that is supposed to result automatically from the contemplation of the intelligible.¹ Such action is meant to be opposed to actions that result from reason, calculation, and planning, and has been put to work to provide a way for Plotinus’ sage to act, and in particular to act *morally*, without compromising his

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A version of this paper was presented at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 2006, where it received a helpful discussion. For comments and suggestions I am particularly indebted to Peter Adamson, Julie Cassiday, Christoph Helmig, Christoph Horn, Jan Opsomer, David Sedley, and Carlos Steel. I have also profited greatly from a reading group held in autumn 2005 at King’s College London on *Ennead* 3. 8 with Peter Adamson, Verity Harte, M. M. McCabe, and others. I would like to thank Williams College and the Humboldt-Stiftung for funding the research leave during which this paper was written, and Andreas Speer for welcoming me into the Thomas-Institut for this period.

¹ e.g. A. Schniewind, *L’Éthique du sage chez Plotin [L’Éthique]* (Paris, 2003), 190 with n. 7: ‘les actions du sage sont l’expression (παρακολούθημα) de sa propre contemplation . . . Plotin évoque deux possibilités: d’une part, les actions par faiblesse (ἀσθένεια) de contemplation, pour ceux qui ne parviennent pas à l’Un; d’autre part — et c’est là ce qui correspond au sage — les actions en tant qu’activités secondaires (παρακολούθημα), issues de la contemplation’; D. O’Meara, *Platonopolis* (Oxford, 2003), 75: ‘As regards humans, this means that human action and production can result as by-products, secondary effects, of knowledge, or, if not, as inferior substitutes for knowledge’; A. H. Armstrong, ‘Platonic Eros and Christian Agape’, *Downside Review*, 75 (1961), 105–21 at 114–15 (repr. in A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (London, 1979), ch. ix): ‘A man, in his opinion, will act more virtuously if, instead of thinking “I propose to perform the following virtuous actions”, he simply concentrates his mind on virtue so intensely that the virtuous actions follow naturally and spontaneously as occasion requires.’ Cf. J. R. Bussanich, ‘The Invulnerability of Goodness: The Ethical and Psychological Theory of Plotinus’, *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 6 (1990) 151–84 at 180–4.

contemplation.² This opposition is found most markedly when he compares the non-deliberative manner in which the World-Soul (as well as Nature and the heavenly bodies) acts with the deliberative manner in which we normally act. 'Automatic action' is thus a term I am using to describe this kind of spontaneous and non-deliberative action. A theory of automatic action can easily close the gap between the contemplative man and the practical man by allowing for action without deliberation. This is helpful because it is the deliberative element in action that would seem to be incompatible with contemplation. Deliberating about the world—and deliberation is always about the world, since it is about what can be otherwise³—forces one's rational soul to look away from the intelligible to the sensible.

Since this theory has so far been introduced only in a rather cursory manner, I would like to investigate it more closely. What is needed is a more detailed examination of the evidence in favour of the theory and a psychological account that would explain how such action would arise. In addition, the scope of the thesis needs to be determined: just which kinds of action can be performed automatically? Moreover, we need to consider the possibility that deliberation and attention to the sensible world might be in some sense compatible with contemplation after all. As I shall argue in what follows, the metaphysics of Plotinus' psychology commits him to something like a theory of automatic action, and this is corroborated by his views both on the employment of craft knowledge and on the motion of the heavenly bodies. Yet there also seems to be considerable evidence for denying that the sage's actions are always performed in such an automatic manner. Sometimes it appears that he must deliberate, but this is mitigated by the fact that there seems to be a sense in which deliberation about the sensible world *is* compatible with contemplation after all. In short, the automatic execution of practical actions is the ideal but the deliberative execution of them is often a necessity. The extent to which this necessity asserts itself in the sage's life is uncertain.

² Not all scholars, however, are in agreement on this. J. M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality [Road]* (Cambridge, 1967), for example, insists 'the brave man is not an automaton whose reflexes simply cause him to act bravely. That is certainly not how Plotinus understands any virtue' (132).

³ This derives from Aristotle: *EN* 3. 3 and 1139^a13–14.

2. *Praxis* in *Ennead* 3. 8

Before turning to the positive grounds for attributing a theory of automatic action to Plotinus, it is necessary to clear the table a bit by dispelling a piece of spurious evidence. It has been claimed that in 3. 8 Plotinus says that practical action (*praxis*) can be either an automatic by-product of contemplation or else a mere substitute for it for those who cannot contemplate effectively.⁴ However, nowhere in 3. 8 does Plotinus give the former positive and automatic account of *praxis*.

Ennead 3. 8 is Plotinus' most in-depth discussion of contemplation and action, and central to this discussion is a distinction between productive action (*poēsis*, *poiein*) and practical action (*praxis*, *prattein*), a distinction that Plotinus maintains consistently throughout 3. 8. Right at the start of this section Plotinus underlines the negative aspect of practical action:

Every practical action is eager to arrive at contemplation, the necessary practical actions more so [*ἡ μὲν ἀναγκαία [καὶ] ἐπὶ πλέον*],⁵ even though they draw contemplation towards the outer world, and the so-called voluntary practical actions less so, but nevertheless even these [viz. voluntary] practical actions arise by a desire for contemplation. (3. 8. 1. 15–18)

As Plotinus says here and repeats several times throughout 3. 8, all practical action is due to a desire for contemplation. Far from being a by-product of contemplation, these actions all result from an inability to contemplate on account of the feebleness of one's soul.⁶ Contrasted with this practical action is productive action, or what one might call 'automatic action', which is described as

⁴ O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 133. O'Meara then refers back to an earlier section of his book in order to support this claim, but in this earlier section (p. 75) he supports it entirely by 3. 8. 4. 39–47, which I shall discuss below.

⁵ This is Theiler's emendation. Although it is not adopted by Henry–Schwyzer (who print the manuscripts' *καὶ ἐπιπλέον*), Theiler's reasons are compelling and have mostly to do with the parallels between this passage and 4. 4. 44 and 6. 3. 16 (to which he refers): 'der Zwang entschuldigt, nicht die willentliche Wahl'. What is puzzling about the received text is the way that voluntary action is described. It is first said to be *less* directed at the outer world than necessary action, from which we should expect it *more than* necessary action to result from a desire for contemplation. But Plotinus defies this expectation when he says that '*nevertheless* [*ὁμως*] *even this*' voluntary action springs from a desire for contemplation. Why would anyone think otherwise, if voluntary action really is less directed at the outer world? It might even be possible to retain the *καὶ* in the sense of 'even'.

⁶ Cf. 3. 8. 4. 31–6 (cited below) and 3. 8. 6. 1–4.

an action that flows from contemplation as its natural by-product. Plotinus consistently uses *ποιεῖν* and *γεννᾶν* to refer to this brand of activity.⁷

In 3. 8. 6 Plotinus narrows down his conception of *praxis* even further through an inventive exegesis of Plato's divided line. The goal of the ascent is *noēsis*, i.e. the contemplation of *Nous* in the best way possible, which is the contemplation of it as *Nous* itself contemplates, namely without any division between subject and object. Yet as long as one is still below *Nous*, it is not *Nous* itself but the *logos* of it that forms the object of one's intellectual activity. Plotinus' account begins at the level of belief (*pistis*). The man of practical action is at this level. Owing to the feebleness of his soul, the only way he can understand the *logos* of *Nous* is through practical actions. These actions create a *logos* in his soul that gives him at least some conception of the intelligible. To the extent that he now has this, he can refrain from practical action. Importantly, there are degrees of *pistis*, which means that the *logos* that the practical man receives in his soul can vary in clarity. Plotinus seems to be suggesting that the first stage of one's epistemic journey is practical, and that if one is successful at this stage the *logos* created by practical action will become clearer and clearer until the soul finally appropriates it as its own (*oikeion*, 3. 8. 6. 1–21). Once the *logos* has been appropriated, one is at the level of discursive thought (*dianoia*)—an intermediate stage between *pistis* and proper contemplation (*noēsis*). As before, one's epistemic relation to *Nous* is still deficient, and as before this deficiency leads to a specific kind of activity. At this level, however, the activity is no longer practical

⁷ *ποιεῖν* and *γεννᾶν* are used synonymously in 3. 8. 1. 20–1. Throughout 3. 8. 2, which is devoted to Nature, Plotinus never uses *πράττειν*. Rather, Nature is said to *ποιεῖν* a *γέννημα* (3. 8. 2. 29, cf. 3. 8. 4. 29–31). Likewise, the higher Soul and the *logoi* in it are said to *γεννᾶν* and are explicitly said not to *πράττειν* (3. 8. 4. 10–14). Hence, *γέννημα* (3. 8. 4. 16) and *γεννηθέν* (3. 8. 4. 29) are used to describe the automatic outflowings of higher principles. In 3. 8. 7. 4–6 Plotinus contrasts the *πράξεις* which are aimed at contemplation with the *γεννήσεις* which proceed from contemplation. This is further confirmed in 3. 8. 5. 22–5. Here again *γεννώμενον* is used in opposition to *πράξις*. Plotinus' point is that Nature's action only *looks* like a *πράξις* (*πράξιν δοκοῦσαν εἶναι*; in fact, it is a *γεννώμενον* of contemplation and itself contemplation in a weaker form (Nature does not engage in practical action, only humans do (3. 8. 4. 31–2)). This is not to say that Plotinus always uses *ποιεῖν* in this positive sense (though he might do this with *γεννᾶν*); it is too generic for that (for example, in 3. 8. 2. 6–9 he describes craftsmen in terms of *ποιεῖν*, and cf. 3. 8. 4. 32 and 37). Rather, when automatic action is under discussion, Plotinus must resort to these terms, since *πράττειν* invariably signals a contemplative deficiency.

action but discursive action (*προφέρειν, προχειρίζεσθαι*): that is to say, now one ascends by linguistically working through what one does not yet understand. This points to an important difference between the methods of advancing through each of these two sections. In practical action the soul advances by responding to external needs, whereas at this level the soul's action responds to its own needs.⁸ Needless to say, here too there are degrees. To progress through this section of the line involves eliminating the gaps in one's understanding, and by doing this one ensures not merely that the *logos* is one's own (*oikeion*) but that it is no longer even distinct from oneself (*allo*). At this point one has achieved proper contemplation (3. 8. 6. 21–34).

Hence, there seem to be both wider and narrower conceptions of *praxis* in 3. 8. According to the wider conception found throughout 3. 8. 1–5, a *praxis* seems to be any action that results from a feeble soul's desire to contemplate, regardless of whether it is a physical action performed with one's hands or a linguistic one performed with one's head. In 3. 8. 6 we find it used in a narrower sense that refers only to the former. Yet in both cases a practical action is one that occurs in the absence of contemplation and not as its by-product. This also holds for the passage that is sometimes cited⁹ as support for the claim that the sage will perform virtuous *praxeis* as by-products of his contemplative activity:

Everywhere we shall see that productive and practical action [*τὴν ποίησιν καὶ τὴν πράξιν*] are either a feebleness of contemplation or a by-product of it. It is a feebleness if one has nothing after the practical action [*μετὰ τὸ πραχθέν*], and a by-product if someone has something else to contemplate that is prior to and better than the result of the productive action [*τοῦ ποιηθέντος*].¹⁰ For who, being able to contemplate what is authentic, would prefer to go to the authentic thing's image? And slower children also illustrate this point: being incapable with respect to academic subjects and contemplation, they turn to the arts and crafts. (3. 8. 4. 39–47)

⁸ ἃ μὲν γὰρ εὖ προήνεγκεν, οὐκέτι προφέρει, ἃ δὲ προφέρει, τῷ ἐλλείπει προφέρει εἰς ἐπίσκεψιν καταμανθάνουσα ὃ ἔχει. ἐν δὲ τοῖς πρακτικοῖς ἐφαρμόττει ἃ ἔχει τοῖς ἔξω (3. 8. 6. 27–30).

⁹ O'Meara, *Platonopolis*, 75; Schniewind, *L'Éthique*, 190.

¹⁰ Here Plotinus might be drawing on Aristotle's distinction between *praxis* and *poiēsis* as described in *MM* 1197^a3–13 (putting aside for now the question of the *MM*'s authenticity—the work was in any case known to Atticus (fr. 2. 9 Des Places)), though if he is, he reverses Aristotle's verdict regarding the relative importance of each. For Aristotle *praxis* is superior since it contains its end, and for Plotinus *poiēsis* is superior because it, as it were, follows from the true end of contemplation.

The central contrast between productive and practical action, however, is clearly at work in this passage. Plotinus describes the case of feebleness in terms of practical action (τὸ πραχθέν), and the by-product in terms of productive action (τοῦ ποιηθέντος). Hence, he is not saying that both *poiēseis* and *praxeis* can be either feeble substitutes or by-products; rather he is reiterating what he has said all along, namely that although *praxeis* are by definition feeble substitutes aimed at contemplation, there are some actions, namely *poiēseis*, which are by-products of contemplation.

3. Some evidence in favour of automatic action

This does not necessarily mean that virtuous actions cannot proceed automatically from contemplation, as some scholars have claimed that they do. Rather, it means only that what we have seen so far does not show this. What would be needed is some reason to believe that virtuous action is not necessarily a *praxis* in this technical sense but can rather be a *poiēsis*, and I believe several such reasons can be provided. The first of these is drawn from the metaphysical psychology that emerges from some of Plotinus' remarks elsewhere in 3. 8, while the others relate to his discussion of *technai* and of celestial motion.

Plotinus' example of the geometer in 3. 8. 4 sheds some interesting light on his psychology. Recall Plato's short discussion of mathematics in the passage of *Republic* 6 on the divided line. There the student of mathematics is described as beginning his study by 'using what were previously originals as images [τοῖς τότε μιμηθείσιν ὡς εἰκόσιν χρωμένῃ]' (510 B 4), and this is spelt out a little more fully in the sequel: 'the things which they mould and draw . . . they use as images in their search to apprehend those things which one can apprehend only by thought [*dianoia*]' (510 E 1–511 A 2). Of course, the method, role, and objects of mathematics in the line are all subjects of much debate, but what is important here is that Plato presents the physical activity of drawing geometrical figures as what Plotinus would describe as a *practical* activity. The student of mathematics draws figures because he is *seeking* to understand something more intelligible. Hence, this is an activity that aims to correct a contemplative deficiency. It would be difficult to maintain that Plotinus disagreed with Plato here by denying that drawing

geometrical figures is an activity that can help one—at least at some stage—ascend to contemplation, and this is why what Plotinus says about geometers in the course of Nature's speech in 3. 8. 4 is so striking: 'My contemplating produces what is contemplated, *just as geometers draw by contemplating*.'¹¹ Nature likens her production to that of geometers, but since throughout 3. 8 Nature is described in terms of productive activity and is denied any practical activity,¹² what we have here is a description of actual geometers engaged in productive activity: their drawings are by-products of their contemplation. This strongly suggests that the same activities, namely drawing figures, that were performed as practical actions in order to achieve a contemplative state will continue to be performed in the contemplative state, only this time as productive actions.

This view is so remarkable that one might wonder why Plotinus even held it. It surely seems reasonable to say that a student who is striving to understand geometry in a purely intellectual manner will require some kind of visual aid to help him or her conceptualize the subject-matter. But why would an accomplished geometer who is actually conceptualizing the subject-matter produce the same or similar visual aids as an, as it were, automatic consequence of his or her contemplation? I suspect an answer to this question can be found in Plotinus' understanding of the relation of the parts of one's soul to one another. For the sake of simplicity, let us restrict our attention to three parts or powers of soul, as Plotinus often does himself, namely the soul proper—by which I mean the higher soul including reason—the sensitive soul, and the growth soul. We are told that just as soul itself is the offspring of Intellect and receives form (*εἰδοποιεῖσθαι*) by turning to and, as it were, looking at Intellect,¹³ so too are each of the lower parts of soul offspring that are formed by turning to their respective generators. Hence, the sensitive and generative parts or powers of soul, being offspring of soul proper, are themselves informed by turning to this soul and receiving form from it.¹⁴ Each of these three parts of soul,

¹¹ 3. 8. 4. 7–8: καὶ τὸ θεωροῦν μου θεώρημα ποιεῖ, ὥσπερ οἱ γεωμέτραι θεωροῦντες γράφουσιν. ¹² See n. 7.

¹³ Cf. 5. 1. 7. 35–49, and M. Atkinson, *Plotinus: Ennead V. 1* (Oxford, 1983), ad loc.

¹⁴ This pattern continues all the way to matter, which is itself the product of *phusis* and informed by *phusis*, though in this one case we get an exception to the rule. Matter cannot turn back to *phusis* and so *phusis* must itself turn to matter a second time in order to give it form (see D. O'Brien, 'La matière chez Plotin:

then, is essentially interested in contemplating. Moreover, since at every ontological level turning to and contemplating what is above are essence-determining activities, we should expect the successful execution of these activities at one level to have consequences for the subsequent ontological levels. More specifically, if one is successful at turning his or her rational soul to the intelligible and maintaining a contemplative state, then this should have some effect on the sensitive and generative parts of soul in so far as they are themselves essentially determined by their focus on this soul.

The student of geometry has trouble contemplating the intelligible all by itself because his or her rational soul is still caught up in the lower activities of soul. To this extent, this epistemological ascent seems to run parallel to the ascent in virtue as described in *Ennead* 1. 2. There Plotinus distinguishes between two types of virtue, which he labels 'political' (πολιτικά) and 'higher' (μείζους), such that all four cardinal virtues are found in each type.¹⁵ The point of this distinction is to reconcile two competing conceptions of virtue in the Platonic corpus. In the *Republic* Plato describes the four virtues in terms of the relationship among the appetitive, spirited, and rational parts of soul such that the two non-rational parts are made obedient to and harmonious with the rational part. In the *Phaedo*, by contrast, the same four virtues are described in a much different manner. Rather than emphasizing the concord between the rational and irrational parts of soul, the *Phaedo*'s account demands the separation of the soul from the body, which is understood to mean that the rational part of soul must be separated from the irrational,¹⁶ and it is this latter account that seems better suited to explain the *Theaetetus*'s call to 'become like god as much as possible [δμοίωσις θεῶ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν]'.¹⁷ Plotinus' 'higher' virtues are

son origine, sa nature', *Phronesis*, 44 (1999), 45–71). A very clear exposition of this doctrine can be found in Porphyry's *Ad Gaurum* 6. 2–3 (42. 17–43. 5 Kalbfleisch). Here Porphyry makes the plant-like soul an offspring of the sensitive soul, and Plotinus might have intended his remarks to be understood this way. Nevertheless, he usually speaks in more general terms of the sensitive and generative powers both being the offspring of soul (e.g. 3. 4. 1. 1–3; 5. 2. 1. 19–21).

¹⁵ πολιτικά at 1. 2. 1. 16, 21, 23; 1. 2. 2. 13–14; 1. 2. 3. 3, 5, 8, 10; 1. 2. 7. 25. μείζους at 1. 2. 1. 22, 26; 1. 2. 3. 2, 4; 1. 2. 6. 24; 1. 2. 7. 11, 14, 21.

¹⁶ *Phaedo* 67 B 6 ff. (cf. 82 A 10–B 3).

¹⁷ *Theaet.* 176 B 1–2. On this tension in Plato see J. M. Dillon, 'Plotinus, Philo and Origen on the Grades of Virtue' ['Virtue'], in H.-D. Blume and F. Mann (eds.), *Platonismus und Christentum: Festschrift für Heinrich Dörrie* (Münster, 1983), 92–105 at 92–3, who also notes that the qualification κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν takes on a new sense

meant to capture these virtues of separation. There are two prominent aspects of these higher virtues corresponding in turn to the rational soul's relation to what is below it and above it. Drawing on the *Phaedo*'s characterization, Plotinus describes these higher virtues in terms of purity and purification,¹⁸ that is to say in terms of cleansing the rational part of the lower non-rational parts of soul:

It [the soul] will be good and possess virtue when it no longer has the same opinions but acts alone—this is intelligence and wisdom—and does not share the body's experiences—this is self-control—and is not afraid of departing from the body—this is courage—and is ruled by reason and intellect, without opposition—and this is justice. (1. 2. 3. 10–19, trans. Armstrong)

In 1. 2. 6. 11–26 Plotinus then redescribes them in terms of the rational soul's turning towards Intellect. These two sides of higher virtue are what provided the occasion for Porphyry to further distinguish between different kinds of higher virtue, calling the ones 'purificatory' and the others 'contemplative', and capping his list with 'paradigmatic' virtues, which correspond to what Plotinus insists are not virtues at all but rather the Forms of these virtues in the Intellect.¹⁹

According to this scale of virtue, the rational soul is originally wrapped up in the affairs of the body and lower soul, and so virtue is to be achieved by working with these lower powers—in particular on the appetites and spirit—training and habituating them to be moderate. Once this is achieved, the ascent continues by working to loosen the grip that the lower soul has on the rational soul, and

for some subsequent Platonists: 'in virtue of that element in us which is capable of this' (98).

¹⁸ *Phaedo* 67 A ff.; *Enn.* 1. 2. 3. 8, 10–11, 21; 1. 2. 4. 1–9, 16–17; 1. 2. 5. 1, 21–2; 1. 2. 7. 6 and 9.

¹⁹ 1. 2. 6. 13–19 and 1. 2. 7. 1–6. Cf. Porph. *Sent.* 32. 15–70. To what extent Porphyry thereby accurately captures Plotinus' meaning remains a matter of debate. For the different degrees of acceptance of Porphyry's four degrees of virtues as a fair interpretation of *Ennead* 1. 2, compare: Dillon, 'Virtue' 100; H.-D. Saffrey and A.-P. Segonds, 'Introduction', in *Marinus: Proclus, ou sur le Bonheur*, ed. and trans. H.-D. Saffrey, A.-P. Segonds, and C. Luna (Paris, 2001), pp. ix–clxiv at p. lxxv; M. Vorwerk, 'Plato on Virtue: Definitions of Σωφροσύνη in Plato's *Charmides* and in Plotinus *Enneads* I. 2 (19)', *American Journal of Philology*, 122 (2001), 29–47 at 40; C. Wildberg, 'Pros to telos: Neuplatonische Ethik zwischen Religion und Metaphysik', in T. Kobusch and M. Erler (eds.), *Metaphysik und Religion: Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens. Akten des internationalen Kongresses vom 13.–17. März 2001 in Würzburg* (Munich and Leipzig, 2002), 261–78 at 267.

although in 1. 2 Plotinus does not indicate the means by which this is to be achieved, it is likely that he saw mathematics playing an important role here (although probably not as important as Plato thought). Yet here too we should expect the lower powers of soul to play some role, in so far as the rational part is still caught up in them, only here the emphasis will be on the sensitive power. Hence, visual images can be used to present, albeit somewhat obscurely, intelligible content to the rational soul, which would become less dependent on the sensible soul the more it understood of the intelligible. This is, of course, nothing more than a crude sketch of the psychology of the ascent, but one that emphasizes the roles that the lower parts of soul have to play in it. This becomes important when we look to explain the accomplished geometer's automatic drawings. The psychological explanation of such automatic action appears to be that this is how the lower parts of soul respond to the contemplation of the higher part, as Plotinus' exegesis of the myth in the *Phaedrus* makes clear:

Nor is [the object of contemplation] in every part of soul in the same way. This is why the charioteer gives his horses some of what he sees, and they, having received it, clearly would [still] desire what they saw. For they did not receive all of it. And since they are desiring, if they engage in practical action [*πράττειν*], they act [*πράττουσιν*] for the sake of what they desire. And that is contemplation and the object of contemplation. (3. 8. 5. 33–7)

As we saw above, the contemplation of the rational part (the charioteer) should have an effect on the lower parts of soul. They should receive something from it in so far as they are turned towards it, looking to it, and determined by it. The lower parts of soul, however, are by their very nature deficient and incapable of true contemplation, and for this reason they have to settle for 'seeing' what they can with the means at their disposal. Thus, in the accomplished geometer, the rational soul actually contemplates the true objects of geometry, but this contemplation puts the sensitive soul in a peculiar position. On the one hand the object of contemplation does trickle down to it in some muted form, but on the other hand this muted object of contemplation serves only to awaken or intensify the sensitive soul's desire to see this object more completely. Although it is impossible for the sensitive soul *qua* sensitive soul to fulfil this desire by actually contemplating the intelligible directly, it still seeks to improve its contemplation, and it does so by the very

means that originally helped the rational soul to ascend, namely by moulding and drawing. In this way Plotinus' description of practical men would also seem to apply to the lower parts of soul:

Men too, whenever they are too feeble to contemplate, create practical action [τὴν πράξιν ποιοῦνται] as a shadow of contemplation and of the formative principle. For, because their [ability] to contemplate is inadequate on account of a weakness of soul, they are not able to receive the object of contemplation [i.e. the formative principle] adequately and for this reason are not filled [by it], but since they desire to see it, they are drawn to practical action, in order to see [with their eyes] what they could not see with their minds. (3. 8. 4. 31–6)²⁰

If this is right, then Plotinus would seem to think that whichever actions can be performed as practical actions, i.e. that aim to correct a deficiency in contemplation, might also be performed as productive actions, i.e. as actions that arise automatically from contemplation—at least in so far as the actions in question pertain to the lower parts of soul. This also allows for saying that such a productive action of a sage is in some sense simultaneously a practical action. As far as the accomplished geometer's rational soul is concerned, the drawing of figures is productive by resulting automatically from his contemplation. But from the perspective of his sensitive part of soul, it is a practical action, since this part is still deficient and is using the act of drawing to overcome this deficiency.

Plotinus' remarks on the employment of *technai* further suggest that moral actions might be produced in an automatic manner. It might seem odd to lump actions of conventional virtue together with the actions involved in crafts, especially since we can often find Plotinus taking a rather deprecatory attitude towards the crafts. There are passages, for example, where he emphasizes the shortcomings of the *technai* when compared to Nature;²¹ elsewhere he demeans craftsmen and their role in the *polis* (2. 9. 7. 5–7). Yet it is precisely in these criticisms of the *technai* that we can see why it is appropriate for us to consider them together with virtuous action. For perhaps his most damaging criticism of the arts and crafts is that they are directed at another (the bodily) rather than at the self (the higher soul) (3. 8. 6. 19–30; 6. 1. 12. 26–30), and it is this that would seem to make them off-limits to the sage, since he is contin-

²⁰ Armstrong's translation is infelicitous at certain points. This translation is closer to Theiler's.

²¹ 2. 9. 12. 18; 4. 3. 10. 16–19 (and see Armstrong's note here); 4. 3. 21. 14.

ually directed to his higher self. But this is exactly the criticism that Plotinus typically levels against the acts of conventional virtue (3. 6. 5. 15–17; 4. 4. 43. 18–22; 5. 3. 6. 35–9), and so if other-directedness is the problem, then the sage's life will be bereft of both technical actions *and* practical virtue. In fact, Plotinus himself underlines their similarity in this respect. In 6. 3. 16. 13–32 he describes the *technai* of *Republic* 7, namely arithmetic, geometry (presumably including stereometry), music, and astronomy, as double, with one kind directed at the intelligible world and one kind directed at the sensible world. From this he concludes that the lower crafts should be considered as belonging to the sensible world. He then goes on to make effectively the same point about virtue: the conventional virtues belong to the sensible world, while the cathartic virtues belong more to the intelligible world. Similarly, a central objection that Plotinus advances against virtuous action in 6. 8. 5 is that it is intrinsically dependent on and even compelled by external circumstances. An act of conventional courage, for example, depends on there being a war of some kind, and if there is a war, a courageous man is compelled to act. One conclusion that Plotinus draws from this is that there is something almost paradoxical about virtuous action. From a virtuous perspective, virtuous action is not desirable, because there is nothing desirable about the external circumstances that make virtuous action at once possible and necessary. And it is in this regard that Plotinus once again likens virtue to craft:

For certainly if someone gave virtue itself the choice of whether, in order to be able to act, it wants there to be wars for it to be brave in, or injustice so that it might define and set down what is just, and poverty so that it might demonstrate its generosity, or rather whether it wants to remain at rest with all things being well, it would choose rest from action with nothing requiring its services, just as any doctor, for example Hippocrates, would prefer that no one required his craft. (6. 8. 5. 13–20)

The employment of crafts and the actions of conventional virtue appear, therefore, to be in the same predicament. They are other-directed, are dependent on and necessitated by external circumstances, and cannot be proper objects of desire in so far as the accompanying circumstances are unwelcome.²² One might say that this resemblance between virtuous and technical activity is due not

²² This is not to say that Plotinus nowhere distinguishes between the two. He places, for example, the acts of practical virtue higher on the scale of beauty than works of the crafts (1. 6. 9. 2–5). The point here is rather that obstacles that appear

so much to a higher estimation of the *technai*—though, as we shall see below, he does elevate them to some extent—as to a lower estimation of the actions of conventional virtue.

Plotinus, however, also seems to think that this problem of other-directedness can be overcome. He makes it clear, in any case, that the sage will perform both technical actions and acts of conventional virtue.²³ Indeed, the performance of virtuous acts is closely tied to technical know-how. The exhibition of traditional courage requires all sorts of technical skills, e.g. swordsmanship, equestrian and archery skills, etc. If the sage is to have a leading pedagogical role,²⁴ then he will probably need to make use of the psychagogical *technai*, namely music and poetry, rhetoric, and suchlike.²⁵ Moreover, not only is it hard to imagine that the sage would abstain from practising basic skills such as reading and writing, but Plotinus even insists that he will practise more arcane skills such as magic.²⁶ But even if it is clear that the sage is performing such activities, it is not clear *how* this can be so given the problem of other-directedness. Plotinus' remarks on craft-knowledge and its employment suggest that his solution to this problem might involve saying that such actions flow automatically from the sage's contemplation.

The disparaging passages on *technē* briefly reviewed above are balanced by a number of passages where Plotinus is enthusiastic about the crafts and emphasizes the similarities between them and Nature. In particular, he emphasizes a handful of features of *technai* that speak for understanding the proper performance of technical activity to be automatic. First, he takes over from Aristotle the

to stand between the sage and technical action seem to be very much the same as those that appear to stand between him and practical virtue. Plotinus' remark about the ends of crafts not being proper objects of desire might *prima facie* seem limited to crafts such as medicine which aim at restoring the natural. But this should apply to all crafts. The doctor *qua* doctor might wish for sickness and disease so that he can practise his craft, but *qua* man he desires goodness and flourishing. So too, the cobbler might *qua* cobbler desire that people need shoes, but *qua* man (or at least virtuous man) he should desire that people's needs are met so that they are not in need of his services. The point of all skills is to compensate for shortcomings. But no virtuous person could desire that there be shortcomings.

²³ Regarding virtuous actions, see the discussion of 4. 4. 44 below.

²⁴ As emphasized by Schniewind, *L'Éthique*, 161–70.

²⁵ Cf. 4. 4. 31. 16 ff.

²⁶ Plotinus repeatedly refers to magic as a *technē* (e.g. 1. 4. 9. 2; 4. 4. 26. 3; 4. 4. 43. 22), which is reasonable given his naturalistic understanding of magic as the ability to manipulate the cosmos through the sympathy of its parts. In 4. 4. 43 *ὁ σπουδαῖος* is described as countering any spells put on him through his own use of magic.

thesis that *technē* does not deliberate,²⁷ and it is precisely such deliberate, calculated action to which automatic action is opposed. He further describes the action of the handworker as simply flowing from the craft itself in a manner suggestive of an automatic experience: 'Just as even in the crafts, reason [is active only] when the craftsmen are at a loss, but whenever there is no difficulty, the craft takes over and does the work' (4. 3. 18. 5–7). And this should be taken hand in hand with Plotinus' observation that conscious attention to both technical activities and virtuous activities enfeebles the activities.²⁸ Plotinus even explains substandard artefacts in terms of a deficiency in contemplation (3. 8. 7. 23–6). Hence, the products of the handcrafts are called images of the intelligible and the good (e.g. 3. 8. 4. 44), just as virtuous actions are (e.g. 4. 4. 44. 26). Moreover, crafts are described as serving, correcting, and completing Nature by using the same *logoi* ultimately derived from Intellect that Nature uses.²⁹ For this reason the crafts, like Nature, are responsible for delivering beauty from the intelligible world to the sensible world,³⁰ which is possible only through contemplation (3. 8. 7. 23–7).

This provides strong reason for concluding that Plotinus thought such actions could be performed automatically, at least under some circumstances, though for most people they would be performed by conscious effort. Those sceptical of this conclusion might do well to consider an example from Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (part III, chapters 4–5)—the famous account of Levin's mowing experience—which is extremely suggestive of something resembling such a theory of automatic action. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to come up with an account of automatic technical action that is more detailed and compelling than this one.³¹ Here Konstantin Dmitrich Levin has decided to join the muzhiks in their seasonal mowing because in the past he noticed this helped him maintain his character. At first he does a very poor job, though

²⁷ 4. 8. 8. 15–16; cf. Arist. *Phys.* 199^b28–9.

²⁸ 1. 4. 10. 21–33. His examples include courageous action and reading, and he adds that there are 'very many others'.

²⁹ 5. 8. 1 *passim*; 5. 8. 5. 1 ff.; 5. 9. 5. 39–41 (and see Armstrong's note).

³⁰ 1. 3. 2. 10–11; 1. 6. 2. 25–7; 2. 3. 18. 5–8; 2. 9. 16. 43–7; 5. 8. 1 *passim*.

³¹ All translations to follow are from *Anna Karenina*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (New York, 2000). The mowing account (251–6) should be read in its entirety for its parallels to be fully appreciated. This short discussion benefited from a correspondence I had with Julie Cassiday.

he puts an enormous amount of effort and thought into it.³² Yet at some point Levin begins to overcome this awkward start so that his swaths come out perfectly; the mowing action itself becomes effortless and transpires 'without a thought'; he has 'lost all awareness of time' and is in some sense 'unconscious' of what he is doing; the action seems to flow into him from some external source 'as if by magic'; and he is 'happy'. Note that for Levin this automatic mowing remains somewhat sporadic. Whenever he encountered a tussock, 'he had to stop this by now unconscious movement and think'. To this extent one might complain that Levin is a poor illustration of automatic activity. For automatic activity is above all to be attributed to the sage who lives in continual contemplation and is thus presumably exercising automatic action continually. Hence, one might insist that automatic action should not come in a mere sporadic manner, nor should it be endangered by obstacles as it is in Levin's case.³³ Yet, of this superior instantiation of automatic action, too, Tolstoy offers in the same passage an exemplary character in the form of an unnamed old muzhik man who constantly produces perfect swaths in an effortless manner, even when he encounters tussocks or sloping gullies. Since the account is presented from Levin's perspective, we do not learn the details of the old man's inner life, but the construction of the passage seems to encourage us to attribute to him the same interior experiences that Levin had, only in an uninterrupted manner that allows for a variety of complicated tasks.³⁴ For now I would like to keep it an open question whether Plotinus' sage is better captured by the old man than by Levin. What is important here is that Tolstoy's description of the psychological lives of the mowers, and in particular the aloofness with which they execute these activities, captures some of the features that Plotinus makes essential to the ideal practice of crafts, and collectively these features present an approach to phy-

³² Levin 'swung strongly' (249) and 'had to strain all his strength' (250). He also rationally considers his technique: "I'll swing less with my arm, more with my whole body," he thought, comparing Titus's swath, straight as an arrow, with his own rambling and unevenly laid swath' (250).

³³ Cf. 4. 3. 18. 5-7, cited above.

³⁴ Even the old man's jocular attitude towards the sensible world ('as if in play', 'gay', 'jocular', 'joking'; cf. the description of Titus working 'as if playing with his scythe' (249)) is reminiscent of Plotinus' view of the sensible world as an object of play (3. 2. 15. 31-62; 3. 6. 7. 21-7; 3. 8. 5. 6-8; 4. 3. 10. 17-19), in particular when compared to the old man's very reverent attitude towards God: during a single break from mowing, he offers two separate prayers (253-4).

sical activity that does not require that one's conscious attention be directed to the sensible world and would therefore seem fully compatible with contemplative activity.

Finally, Plotinus' discussion of the activities of the celestial bodies in 4. 4. 8. 48–61 would also seem to support automatic action. Here he is concerned to show that they are not even conscious of their movements, which is to say that here again we have the problem of other-directedness. In order to show this, he emphasizes that an action that is not preferred (*proēgoumenon*) does not produce a conscious perception. He illustrates this principle through a sort of psychological reflection on Zeno's paradox. When someone consciously steps a distance of one foot, one also necessarily passes through an initial distance of, say, one inch without being conscious of this passage in so far as it was not one's intended or preferred goal.³⁵ This is exactly how Plotinus wishes to understand the local motions of the celestial bodies. They execute these motions in such a way that they are not preferred, and this is precisely the kind of sensible activity that is compatible with their perpetual contemplation, since it does not draw their attention to the sensible world. Rather, just as the passage through the smallest fraction of a step follows automatically from the step itself, without impinging on one's conscious thought, so too do the complex local motions of the heavenly bodies³⁶ seem to follow automatically from their contemplation of the intelligible.³⁷

The significance of this account of celestial motion grows when one bears in mind Plotinus' view that the motions of the celestial bodies—while not primarily causing sublunar events³⁸—do serve as signs of coming sublunar affairs. This means that for celestial things contemplation results in actions which are in tune with the

³⁵ 4. 4. 8. 19–30; cf. 4. 4. 7. 7–9.

³⁶ Cf. *Rep.* 530 B 2–3 and *Enn.* 2. 1. 2. 8–10, with J. Wilberding (ed., trans., and comm.), *Plotinus' Cosmology: A Study of Ennead II. 1 (40)* (Oxford, 2006), ad loc.

³⁷ And cf. 4. 4. 35. 42–4.

³⁸ They are contributing causes of some events, however. The universe is described as a contributing cause in 2. 3. 14. 15–17; 3. 1. 5. 21–2; 4. 4. 31. 3 ff.; 4. 9. 2. 28–33; the heavenly circuit in 2. 3. 10. 7–10; 3. 1. 6. 3–5; the celestial bodies in 2. 3. 8. 6–8; 2. 3. 12. 1–11; 2. 3. 14. 4–7; 2. 9. 13, 14–18; 4. 4. 6. 15–16; 4. 4. 30. 1–16; 4. 4. 31. 8–12; 4. 4. 38. 22–3; place in 2. 3. 14. 4–7 and 16; 3. 1. 5. 24–7. The effects for which these cosmic agents are responsible include emotions and characters (2. 3. 9. 10–14), dispositions and temperaments (2. 3. 11), corporeal states (3. 1. 6. 1 ff.), and perhaps actions (4. 4. 30–1). For an excellent recent discussion, see P. Adamson, 'Plotinus on Astrology', forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 35 (2008).

goings-on in this world and of which the celestial things themselves are only remotely if at all conscious. And this is precisely how the sage would behave according to the theory of automatic action. Of course, human agents cannot be put on a par with celestial agents, but it might still be the case that some contemplation leads to some automatic action for humans as well as for celestials.³⁹

4. Some evidence against automatic action

As was briefly discussed in the introduction, deliberation in action seems to be a problem because it forces the rational soul to turn its attention away from the intelligible towards the sensible. This is what gives the theory of automatic action some of its force. For in some important sense attention to the sensible world is incompatible with being directed to the intelligible. And since Plotinus and Porphyry in his *Life of Plotinus* insist that practical action is in fact compatible with 'looking or being directed to the intelligible' (βλέπειν πρὸς τὸ νοητόν),⁴⁰ one might conclude from this that practical action must proceed automatically. However, as we shall see presently there is also an equally important sense in which attention to the sensible world is compatible with 'looking at the intelligible'. It all depends on how we (and Plotinus) understand the expression 'to look or be directed at something' (*blepein pros ti*).

It is important to distinguish between the continuous state of being directed to the intelligible and the intermittent state of union with the One (cf. *VP* 8 ad fin. and 23). In the latter one actually steps outside oneself and is taken over by the One. In this state activity seems to be impossible. Plotinus makes it clear, for instance, that virtue is left behind during such moments (1. 2. 7 and 6. 9. 11). The former state, however, seems to be compatible with activity. Porphyry, for instance, describes Plotinus as being continually directed at the intelligible (πρὸς τὸν νοῦν)⁴¹ and yet engaging in all sorts of demanding activities, such as conversations and managing

³⁹ Note too the significance of Plotinus' use of *προηγούμενον* here. Plotinus often contrasts *προηγούμενον* and *ἀναγκαῖον* (e.g. 6. 3. 16. 30–1), and as we shall see below, the sage too is supposed to perform his actions not as preferred but as necessary.

⁴⁰ Or sometimes *εἶχεν πρὸς τι* (e.g. 4. 4. 43. 22).

⁴¹ *VP* 8. 23; 9. 17–18; 23. 4. For Plotinus the Intellect (ὁ νοῦς) and its intelligible object (τὸ νοητόν) are identical (*Enn.* 5. 5).

financial accounts.⁴² This roughly fits with Plotinus' own remarks on contemplation and action. For as we shall see below, he clearly thinks that the sage is engaged in action while remaining directed to the intelligible. Yet he also makes it clear that at times the sage will go beyond this continuous state, abandon himself and action, and unite with the One (1. 2. 7; 4. 8. 1; 6. 9. 11). In what follows I shall restrict my focus to the former, the question of how it is psychologically possible for the sage to be *both* turned towards the intelligible world *and* engaged in practical action in the sensible world.

There are two general ways for these activities to be compatible. The first is thoroughgoing, which is to say that even when the sage is performing these sensible activities, his contemplative life goes on as usual. This full compatibility seems *prima facie* somewhat fantastic, since it amounts to saying that the sage can engage in contemplation just as well on the battlefield as in his armchair. The alternative would be a more moderate version of compatibility. The idea here would be that although sensible activity really does distract one's reason from contemplation and prohibits one from actively contemplating at the same time, such activity is nevertheless not incompatible with the contemplative *life* in so far as contemplation can immediately resume once these activities are completed without having to go through the motions of reascending. These two varieties of compatibility roughly correspond to two possible senses of 'looking or being directed at something' (*blepein pros ti*)—one attentive and one normative. In the former, attentive sense, *blepein pros ti* is used in a very commonplace way to refer to one's attention being directed at some thing. For example, someone who 'looks or is directed at' a colour is simply looking at the colour and taking in the impression it offers.⁴³ But Plotinus usually uses the expression in a much stronger and more normative sense, as in those passages where it is used to describe the successful epistemic relation to the Forms.⁴⁴ Here *blepein pros ti* means to take something as a model, as, for example, in 4. 4. 12. 29–31: 'But if [the soul] does not know the future things which it is going to make, it will not make them with knowledge or looking at any [model] but will make whatever comes to it', and in 1. 4. 6. 4–7: 'But if well-being is to

⁴² *VP* 8. 19–20 and 9. 16–18.

⁴³ Cf. 4. 5. 1. 24–6 and 4. 5. 2. 50–3.

⁴⁴ Cf. the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*, who is said to βλέπειν πρὸς τὸ κατὰ ταῦτα ἔχον ἀεί (28A 5–6).

be found in possession of the true good, why should we disregard this and omit to use it as a standard to which to look in judging well-being?’⁴⁵ Central to the issue of the sage’s relation to action is the question of how these two senses of *blepein pros ti* are related. If Plotinus thinks that they simply collapse into one, we end up with a sage who, because he is clearly focused on the intelligible, is unaware of what is going on around him in the sensible world. On this account the sage is still capable of practical action—but only via something comparable to a theory of automatic action according to which his actions would simply fall from his contemplation without him having to direct his attention to the sensible world. If these two senses remain distinct, on the other hand, it should be possible to direct oneself to earthly matters in the harmless sense of attending to one’s daily business, without directing oneself to earthly matters in the damaging sense of taking such things as one’s model.

Porphyry’s description of Plotinus’s interaction with his students both confirms our findings that contemplation and action are compatible and strongly suggests that the compatibility at issue is of the more moderate variety. At *VP* 8. 11–15 he relates:

Even when he was talking to someone and engaged in conversation, he kept to his speculation, so that while satisfying his necessary part in the conversation he preserved his train of thought on the matters of his present investigation.

This is a clear statement of the compatibility between theoretical contemplation and other-directed action. It is *not*, however, a clear statement that both of these activities can *actively be pursued* at once, as Harder’s and Bréhier’s translations would suggest.⁴⁶ As the larger context makes clear, Plotinus has already thought through some issue from beginning to end before the conversation in question takes place.⁴⁷ Once the conversation is over, he resumes putting

⁴⁵ Both translations by Armstrong, who brings out well the normative sense involved. In the former passage, I put ‘the soul’ in brackets to make the subject clear, but the bracketed ‘model’ is Armstrong’s.

⁴⁶ Harder: ‘Er konnte sich mit jemandem unterhalten und zusammenhängende Gespräche führen, und doch bei seiner Untersuchung sein; was zum Gespräch gehörte, nahm er wahr, und *gleichzeitig führte er unausgesetzt den Gedanken seiner Untersuchung weiter*’; Bréhier: ‘Il pouvait causer avec quelqu’un et entretenir une conversation, *tout en poursuivant ses réflexions*; il satisfaisait aux convenances de l’entretien, sans s’interrompre de penser aux sujets qu’il s’était proposé d’étudier’. (See the Plotinus entries in the bibliography below for these translations.)

⁴⁷ *VP* 8. 8–11.

his thoughts down on the page as if he had never been interrupted.⁴⁸ Thus, Porphyry is far from claiming that Plotinus made active contemplative progress while chatting over tea about some unrelated subject. He is simply paying tribute to the resilience of his master's power of concentration. This, then, is how we should understand his subsequent claim that Plotinus 'was simultaneously present to both himself and to others' (*VP* 8. 19).⁴⁹ The idea here is not that Plotinus can actively be making progress in both the human and the noetic arenas at precisely the same moment. Rather, they are both present to him in the sense that he never loses touch of either, and for this reason he can alternately pursue the one without losing track of where he is in the other. Porphyry's subsequent account of Plotinus' attention to his charges' financial accounts should be understood similarly. He says that 'though [Plotinus] shielded so many from the worries and cares of ordinary life, he never, while awake, relaxed his attention [*τάσιν*] towards the Intellect'.⁵⁰ Here again it would be unreasonable to understand Porphyry to be saying that Plotinus actively contemplated while filling out his students' tax reports. The claim is rather that Plotinus can direct his attention to such trifling matters without cutting himself off from the intelligible world. While his *advance* in the intelligible world is compromised by his attention to these mundane activities, his preservation of intelligible presence benefits him in two significant ways. First, as we saw in the previous example from *VP* 8, any theoretical progress he has made is preserved in such a way that he can access it immediately when his attention is again free to do so. Secondly, the normative sense of *blepein pros ti* is surely preserved, which is to say that even when Plotinus is obliged to engage in financial dealings, he is not 'bewitched' by them into thinking that these things are genuinely important.⁵¹ It is a testament to his preserved intelligible presence that he does not have to go through the motions of reascending after such activities. This distinction between attentive and normative directedness shows that the compatibility of contemplation and practical action does not necessarily

⁴⁸ Ibid. 15–19.

⁴⁹ On this see A. Smith, 'The Significance of Practical Ethics for Plotinus', in J. Cleary (ed.), *Traditions of Platonism: Essays in Honour of John Dillon* (Aldershot, 1999), 227–36.

⁵⁰ *VP* 9. 16–18: καὶ ὁμῶς τοσοῦτοις ἐπαρκῶν τὰς εἰς τὸν βίον φροντίδας τε καὶ ἐπιμελείας τὴν πρὸς τὸν νοῦν τάσιν οὐδεποτ' ἂν ἐγρηγορότως ἐχάλασεν (trans. Armstrong, revised).

⁵¹ On this aspect of bewitchment, see below on 4. 4. 44.

demand a theory of automatic action. In fact, a closer examination of Plotinus' understanding of the psychology involved in both natural and moral activities reveals, at the very least, that there must be limits to any theory of automatic action.

By 'natural activities' I mean those activities that are directed towards the body and care for it. Although this sort of activity might seem trivial, the possibility of performing such activities automatically might be critical to Plotinus' understanding of the sage. Plotinus pinpoints the origins of these desires in the body itself—or more specifically the qualified body (*τὸ τοιόνδε σῶμα*), i.e. body plus a trace of soul—but the lower soul appropriates these desires on account of its having sunk into body.⁵² Importantly, neither the body nor the lower soul seems to be in a position to satisfy these desires alone. Rather, the middle soul, reason, is said to attend to the desires of the body and decide whether and how to satisfy those needs.⁵³ In other words, Plotinus describes even these basic activities as requiring calculation and planning, and hence as not being automatic. The significance of this emerges through a comparison between a particular soul in its relation to its body on the one hand, and the World-Soul and stellar souls in relation to their bodies, the universe and stars respectively, on the other.⁵⁴

The World-Soul and stellar souls are analogous to our own souls in two respects. First, each of them is responsible for a specific body, just as we are. Moreover, their souls are also divided into two parts or powers: a higher soul that remains above and contemplates and a lower soul that takes on responsibility for the body.⁵⁵ However, Plotinus emphasizes over and over again that the World-Soul and stellar souls, unlike particular souls, care for their bodies *without calculation or planning*.⁵⁶ Does this mean that an individual human being, too, can care for his or her body in this automatic way, if only he or she achieves the status of sage? There are good reasons for thinking that this is not the case. For the automatic maintenance of

⁵² 4. 4. 20, esp. ll. 25–35, and 4. 4. 21. 19–21.

⁵³ 4. 3. 12. 6–8; 4. 4. 20. 16–19 and 33–6 (where *τὸ μὲν* refers to the body, the first *τῇν δέ* to nature, and the second *τῇν δέ* to the higher soul); 4. 4. 21. 7–14; 4. 8. 5. 26–7; cf. 2. 1. 5. 21–3.

⁵⁴ This situation of stellar souls is equivalent to that of the World-Soul (4. 8. 2. 38–42—see below).

⁵⁵ 2. 3. 18. 12–13; 3. 8. 5. 9–16; 4. 3. 4. 21–9; 4. 3. 11. 8–12; 4. 8. 2. 26–33; 4. 8. 7. 26–31; 4. 8. 8. 13–16. Stars, too, are said to have lower souls or natures in 2. 3. 9. 34–5.

⁵⁶ e.g. 2. 2. 2. 26–7; 2. 3. 17. 9–11; 2. 9. 11. 8–9; 4. 4. 11. 4–5; 4. 8. 8. 15.

the universe and stars is due in large part to special features of the bodies being maintained. The body of the universe has its parts in their natural places: that is, earth is already at the centre and fire at the periphery.⁵⁷ Furthermore, it suffers no loss of parts⁵⁸ and is not attacked by other bodies outside of it,⁵⁹ and consequently does not require nourishment in order to replace any lost parts.⁶⁰ Likewise, the stars are made up only of a special kind of fire called corporeal light whose natural place is in the heavens and which is especially co-operative with their souls. Therefore, even though the stars are parts of the universe and not wholes, they do not suffer any (external) flux and consequently do not require any nourishment either.⁶¹ It is on account of all of these features that these bodies themselves are said to have no desires or needs (4. 8. 2. 48–9), and are therefore able to co-operate in such a way that the souls responsible for them, i.e. their lower souls, take care of them without toil (and hence everlastingly).⁶² This in turn is the reason why the higher parts of the World-Soul and stellar souls do not have to ‘sink’ into body by applying their cognitive faculty to work at maintaining their bodies (4. 8. 2. 46–53).⁶³ Rather, each of them can ‘keep itself in a place of safety’ (4. 3. 6. 21–2).

By contrast, human bodies, like the bodies of all sublunar living things, are made up of a collection of elements that are forcibly constrained to remain in unnatural places. The fire in a human body, for example, tries to leave the body and move up to the periphery of the universe. Hence, our individual natures must act as a ‘second bond’, trying to keep the body’s constituent parts in their place,⁶⁴ but in spite of this the constituent elements achieve some degree of success in these attempts and for this reason we

⁵⁷ 2. 9. 7. 27–32; 4. 8. 2. 10–11; cf. 2. 1. 3. 5–7.

⁵⁸ 2. 1. 3. 2–4; cf. 2. 9. 7. 30.

⁵⁹ 1. 1. 2. 13 ff.; 1. 2. 1. 11–12; 2. 1. 1. 14; 2. 1. 3. 10–12.

⁶⁰ 4. 8. 2. 18–19; cf. *Tim.* 33 C 4–8 and *Enn.* 2. 1. 3. 25–6.

⁶¹ 2. 1. 7. 27 ff., and see Wilberding, *Cosmology*, 45–62.

⁶² 2. 1. 3. 10–12, where after *μηδέν* one should understand *ῥεῖ* or *ἄπεισι*, and not *ἔστιν* as Armstrong does. See Wilberding, *Cosmology*, ad loc. and 49–50.

⁶³ This is why the maintenance of the universe by Nature is repeatedly said to proceed without planning or reason (e.g. 2. 2. 2. 26–7; 2. 3. 17. 9–11; 2. 9. 11. 8–9; 4. 4. 11. 4–5; 4. 8. 8. 15). By contrast, in the case of individual bodies, it is precisely reason that is forced to provide for the lower parts of the soul and their bodily concerns. On this, see below. This is also the reason why Plotinus can say that the World-Soul is not subject to enchantment (5. 1. 2. 11–14).

⁶⁴ 2. 9. 7. 28–30; cf. 2. 1. 5. 8–14; 4. 8. 8. 16–23.

require nutrition, unlike the universe and the celestial things. But as we saw above, it is the middle (rational) soul that must provide for the bodily desires of the lower parts of soul, and so, unlike the universe and the celestial things, the maintenance of a human body does require reasoning, since it is for reason to answer the lower parts' cries when our body needs attention.⁶⁵ This means that the very feature that allowed the World-Soul and stellar souls to maintain their bodies automatically and therefore to contemplate without interruption is problematically absent in our case,⁶⁶ and this absence is reflected in the status of the middle soul. There does not even seem to be a middle soul for the World-Soul and the stellar souls, since they do not operate by planning and calculation. But for us the middle soul is all-important.⁶⁷ Our higher souls are, after all, always contemplating no matter what we do,⁶⁸ and our lower souls are more or less committed to the body. It is the middle soul and its respective attention to what lies above and below it that determines the extent of one's sagacity. Hence, our relation to contemplation appears to be jeopardized by these natural activities to the extent that our middle soul provides for the needs of the body and lower soul.⁶⁹ All of this suggests that while it would be extremely helpful if our bodies could be maintained automatically, the fractional nature of our bodies precludes precisely this.

In spite of all this, the possibility of automatic natural activity might be defended up to a point. After all, animals are in a similar position to humans in so far as they, too, are parts of the universe and not the universe as a whole, being made up of elements that strive to get back to their natural places and requiring nourishment to replace them, and animals are able to maintain their bodies without the calculations of reason, since according to Plotinus animals do not possess faculties of reason.⁷⁰ This is effectively an admission that it is possible to perform these natural activities, such as keep-

⁶⁵ See above, n. 53, and 4. 8. 2. 11-14; 4. 8. 4. 12-21.

⁶⁶ To make matters worse, at one point Plotinus even suggests (2. 1. 5. 8-14) that it is not *just* our bodies that create problems, but that our lower souls are also deficient compared with that of the World-Soul (2. 9. 7. 7 ff.; 4. 3. 6. 10-15), and that the sublunar region is itself efficacious in some negative way.

⁶⁷ This is no doubt related to our being 'in the middle' between gods and beasts (3. 2. 8. 4-11).

⁶⁸ On this see T. Szlezák, *Platon und Aristoteles in der Nuslehre Plotins* (Basel and Stuttgart, 1979), 167-9.

⁶⁹ 4. 3. 17. 26-8; 4. 8. 3. 25-7; 4. 8. 4. 18-21.

⁷⁰ Reason, being the 'middle' soul, is between gods and animals (3. 2. 8. 4-11).

ing warm and consuming food, without the aid of planning and calculation, although Plotinus does not give details as to how such activities could be executed without them.⁷¹ Perhaps this opens up the possibility that the sage, too, can accomplish these things without actually directing his rational attention to them. There is, however, a problem with suggesting that the sage's execution of these activities proceeds in a manner similar to that of animals. Animals simply do what comes naturally. At best, dogs eat when they are hungry, but at worst they eat whenever there is food around, and this is not the manner of bodily care that Plotinus envisages for the sage. Rather, he says that the sage needs to neglect his body, though not entirely:

There must be a sort of counterpoise on the other side, towards the best, to reduce the body and make it worse, so that it may be clear that the real man is other than his outward parts . . . He will take care of his bodily health, but will not wish to be altogether without experience of illness, nor indeed also of suffering. (1. 4. 14. 11–14, 21–3, trans. Armstrong, slightly revised)

One reason for this delicate neglect is that if the body grows too strong, the strength of its desires and their ability to attract reason's attention will likewise increase. Hence, even of health there can be too much for the sage (1. 4. 14. 8–11).⁷² So the sage's care for his body will be decidedly different from that of animals for their bodies, and indeed one might say it is different from the *natural* approach to bodily maintenance. This seems to compromise the claim that the sage's bodily upkeep could proceed in the non-reflective manner that it does in animals, since reason needs to play

⁷¹ As R. R. K. Sorabji has shown (*Animal Minds and Human Morals* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1993), 7–29), the denial of reason in animals requires an expansion of their perceptual content, in order to account for the variety of activities in which animals engage. Some nutritive activities must find some analogous explanation, since plants, which lack even sensation, perform them (1. 4. 1. 21–3).

⁷² This is drawn from Plato's account in *Republic* 9 of how to groom the tripartite soul so that reason can rule. He emphasizes that the appetitive part must be weakened so as not to be in a position to challenge reason's authority (588 E–589 B). Schniewind argues that this 'counterpoise' serves only a pedagogical role: the sage's body shows his comrades and acquaintances that the goal in life is not to be found in the bodily (161–5). But in my opinion this fails to account for ll. 8–11 and especially for ll. 17–19: *περὶ δὲ σοφὸν ταῦτα ἴσως μὲν ἂν οὐδὲ τὴν ἀρχὴν γένοιτο, γενομένων δὲ ἐλαττώσει αὐτός, εἴπερ αὐτοῦ κήδεται*. This passage clearly states that it is for the sage's *οἰν* sake, i.e. for the sake of his higher soul, that he 'reduces' his body. While Schniewind is right to draw out this pedagogical function directed to others, a weak body and lower soul is also important to the sage himself, since a robust body would demand more attention.

an active role in order to achieve this kind of delicate neglect. After all, it is hard to imagine that the lower soul, when left to its own devices and desires and needs, would 'reduce the body and make it worse'.

The lower soul, however, is *not* left to its own devices. Plotinus repeatedly emphasizes the need to train and habituate the lower soul,⁷³ and it is reasonable to suppose that part of this training is aimed at habituating the lower soul, for example, to consume less than would be conducive to a robust body. This training is, of course, performed by reason and ultimately should allow the sage to take care of his body, to some extent at least, without turning away from the intelligible world (2. 9. 15. 15–17).⁷⁴ More importantly, according to the metaphysical psychology described above, the sage's contemplation should have a positive effect all by itself on the lower part of soul. In so far as the lower soul is constantly looking to and informed by the middle soul, all of the actions of the lower soul will in some sense flow from the middle soul even when it is not consciously directing its activity. Hence, the desires and actions of the sage's lower soul are not due merely to habituation; rather, they are the mediate result of the sage's contemplation. Porphyry's report that Plotinus's contemplation reduced the amount of sleep he needed can be viewed as an example of how contemplation can have a positive trickle-down effect on the needs and desires of the lower parts of soul.⁷⁵ So it would seem that the sage might have some chance of emulating the stars, though Plotinus indicates clearly enough at times that any such emulation has its limits, even for the sage.⁷⁶

⁷³ This is political virtue—political in the psychological sense of a soul that is analogous to a city, i.e. tripartite (cf. 4. 4. 17. 23–35)—which is achieved by habituation and training (1. 1. 10. 11–14; 6. 8. 6. 22–5; 1. 3. 6. 6–7; 2. 9. 15. 15–17).

⁷⁴ It might be one's own reason that trains the lower soul, but more probably it is another's reason—e.g. that of one's parents or educators.

⁷⁵ *VP* 8. 21–3. Moreover, Porphyry reports that Plotinus had built up a certain resistance to magic: the magical assault on Plotinus backfired because of 'the great power of Plotinus' soul' (*VP* 10). This is significant because magic properly affects only the body and lower soul, so that any resistance to it that he had acquired would suggest that Plotinus' contemplative activity as a philosopher had some sort of effect on his lower soul. For an alternative view, see L. Brisson, 'Plotin et la magie', in L. Brisson *et al.* (eds.), *Porphyry: La Vie de Plotin* (2 vols.; Paris, 1992), ii. 465–75 at 465–8, who suggests that Plotinus' resistance is not automatic, but results rather from 'les efforts de la partie rationnelle de l'âme' and in particular through arguments and exhortations (467).

⁷⁶ 1. 4. 15. 16–20, and see below.

These limits to any theory of automatic action seem to be made most explicit in Plotinus' discussion of moral psychology in 4. 4. 44. This chapter is part of a larger section (4. 4. 40–5) in which he examines the efficacy of magic and enchantment, which for the most part Plotinus restricts to the lower parts of soul (4. 4. 43. 3–5). For Plotinus magic loses any trace of the supernatural because it is Nature itself that is responsible for the efficacy of magic spells, which simply exploit the cosmic sympathy at work in the universe. Yet an individual's rational soul can also fall victim to enchantment if one allows it to become too attached to the lower parts of soul. This serves as a point of departure for Plotinus in 4. 4. 43–4 to examine the kind of psychological enchantment that takes place entirely within an individual soul, namely when the lower parts of soul and in particular nature 'enchant' one's rational part.⁷⁷ In this he is drawing on *Phaedo* 81 B 3–4, where the soul is said to be 'enchanted' (γοητευομένη) by the body and its pleasures and desires, and on *Rep.* 3, 413 B 1 ff., where Socrates describes how men might lose the beliefs they received through education by 'being enchanted' (γοητευθέντες) by pleasures or fears. The central question of this discussion concerns the relative susceptibility of the man of contemplation and the man of action to such internal enchantment. The main conclusion of the discussion is that the contemplative man is not subject to magic, but we also find here a discussion of what it is about practical activity that might be opposed to contemplation and in what way the contemplative man might engage in moral action. For this reason the chapter deserves close attention.

The critical point that Plotinus makes against practical activity is that it is necessarily motivated by the lower part of the soul: 'reason does not provide the impulse, rather the premisses [*protaseis*] of passion are the starting-point and belong to the irrational'.⁷⁸ He supports this general claim by going through nine different categories of action and showing how in each case an irrational motivation is at work:

- (1) care for (one's) children (ll. 6–7);
- (2) eagerness to get married (l. 7);

⁷⁷ Cf. 4. 4. 43. 22–3 and 44. 29–30.

⁷⁸ ll. 5–6: οὐχ ὁ λόγος τὴν ὁρμήν, ἀλλ' ἀρχὴ καὶ τοῦ ἀλόγου αἱ τοῦ πάθους προτάσεις. Note that Armstrong puts a comma after ἀλόγου and translates rather awkwardly.

- (3) whatever entices humans through appetitive pleasure (ll. 8–9);
- (4) actions caused by our spirit (l. 9);
- (5) actions caused by our appetite (l. 10);
- (6) political activity and desire for office (ll. 10–11);
- (7) actions taken to avoid suffering (l. 12);
- (8) actions taken to increase one's share (l. 13);
- (9) actions taken on account of necessities and which seek to satisfy nature's needs (ll. 14–15).

There are several things to note about this list. First, many of these categories of action are already described in psychological terms in such a way that it becomes more or less tautologous to say that they are necessarily motivated by the lower soul, e.g. (4) or (5). Yet other categories, e.g. (1) (2), and (6), are not described psychologically, so that Plotinus' psychological claim becomes more substantive, though hardly unreasonable. After all, it is realistic to say, for example, that marriage and children are objects of the generative soul and that it therefore supplies an irrational desire for them, so that any action aimed at these ends will be at least partially irrational in its motivation, and similarly for the spirited part of soul and its desire for power.

This depreciatory account of the motivation behind actions in the sensible world might seem to make them completely off-limits to the sage who has advanced to contemplation and therefore turned his reason away from the body and lower soul, but in the sequel Plotinus suggests otherwise. This begins with an objection: 'What if someone says that the actions [*praxeis*] concerned with noble things are not subject to enchantment, or else even contemplation, since it is of noble things, must be said to be under enchantment?' (ll. 16–18). One might expect Plotinus to answer this objection by going through his distinction between contemplation and action, but instead he offers a more nuanced account of the practical man and his relation to practical actions by distinguishing two ways in which actions might be performed.

In this more nuanced account, the practical man is no longer defined simply by the fact that he performs actions. Rather, his attitude to these actions becomes all important, the distinctive feature of his attitude being that he is taken in by the mere traces of nobility that these noble actions possess, and—similar to Plato's lovers

of sights and sounds—is unaware that there is something else beyond these actions that is truly noble. And this is why he chooses to perform these noble actions (ll. 25–7). Plotinus strikingly describes the practical man both as ‘choosing’ (*αἰρεῖται*, l. 26) and as being ‘dragged by his irrational impulses’ (*ἐλχθέντα ἀλόγοις ὁρμαῖς*, l. 31). As we shall see, a combination of necessity and choice is also prominent in the contemplative man’s relation to action, though in a very different way. Here the practical man chooses in the sense that this could hardly be described as a case of weakness of will, where the rational part of the soul is helpless in its attempt to achieve the goal it set for itself on account of the coerciveness of the irrational parts. Rather, this action is precisely what the rational part wants, and so it steers the soul to action. His freedom of choice, however, has been compromised by his ill-gotten conception of nobility, and this is where the irrational impulses come in. Without getting into the psychological mechanics, Plotinus acknowledges (surely correctly) that certain desires have the power to change the way we see the world,⁷⁹ and the problem with the practical man is that the desires of his lower parts of soul have exercised such a power. As a result the practical man believes, for example, that suffering really is bad and that the death of one’s child is a genuine tragedy. Hence, he comes to the conclusion that conventional human flourishing is life’s noble end (*to kalon*), and it is this that he aims to promote. The irrational impulses, therefore, do not drag him in the akratic sense of overpowering; rather, they do so by exercising their power of enchantment over the rational soul.

The alternative to the practical man’s approach to action is described in ll. 18–24 as the approach that the contemplative man takes.⁸⁰ We are told that he performs these actions ‘as necessary’.

⁷⁹ This again is in tune with Plato’s remarks about how certain passions can influence the (rational) soul (*Phaedo* 81 B and *Rep.* 413 B ff.). For Plato erotic desire was particularly dangerous in this regard (*Phdr.* 238 E; *Rep.* 572 E–573 B).

⁸⁰ That this is a description of the contemplative man is clear from the characterization given here. We are told that (i) he is not enchanted (l. 20), (ii) he does not look to the things in this world (ll. 20–1) and his life is not other-directed (l. 21), (iii) he has no false illusions about his actions—he knows they are merely necessary (ll. 18, 20), (iv) he grasps something else, namely what is truly good (ll. 19–20), and finally (v) he nevertheless does act when necessary (ll. 18–19). These are precisely the characteristics that mark the contemplative man: (i) he alone is not subject to enchantment (ll. 1–2 and 33); (ii) he is self-directed rather than other-directed (l. 2) and so does not have to pursue (ll. 34–5); (iii) his reason is not deceived by his lower parts of soul (ll. 34–6); (iv) what is good is in his possession (l. 36); and yet he does do what is required of him (l. 4).

The discussion leading up to this remark would suggest that the necessity in question concerns the impulses coming from the lower soul. The rational soul is in some sense required to fulfil the demands of the lower soul. This fits well with the description of the lower impulses themselves. They are described as *protaseis* (l. 6) or premisses in a syllogism, and as such one would expect some action to follow necessarily from them. Likewise, and more specifically, the ninth category above is explicitly said to deal with the necessary demands of nature. Both the practical man and the contemplative man, then, are subject to the necessity coming from the lower soul. The difference between them is that the practical man is enchanted by this necessity into believing that flourishing in the sensible world is all-important, while the contemplative man retains the appropriate perspective. He does act, but he acts out of compulsion coming from his lower soul, realizing that these actions are not what is truly noble (ll. 18–20).⁸¹ He is not enchanted ‘because he knows the necessity and does not direct his gaze to this world, and because his life is not directed to other things’ (ll. 20–1). This last phrase is particularly significant, since it was precisely the other-directedness of the practical man’s life that made him susceptible to enchantment:

Everything that is directed to [πρός] something else is enchanted by something else. For what it is directed to enchants it and directs it. Only what is directed to itself is not susceptible to enchantment. Therefore, both every action and the entire life of the practical man are in a state of enchantment. For he is moved to those things that charm him. (4. 4. 43. 16–20)

⁸¹ Plotinus is making a distinction in these lines between being enchanted and (merely) being forced, but the text as it is punctuated by Henry–Schwyzer (and thus translated by Armstrong and others) obscures his point. I believe the text of 4. 4. 44. 16–24 should be as follows: *εἰ δέ τις λέγοι τὰς πράξεις τῶν καλῶν ἀγορευτούς εἶναι ἢ καὶ τὴν θεωρίαν καλῶν οὖσαν γοητεύεσθαι λεκτέον, εἰ μὲν ὡς ἀναγκαίης καὶ τὰς καλὰς λεγομένας πράξεις πράττοι ἄλλο τὸ οὕτως καλὸν ἔχων, οὐ γεγοήτευται. οἶδε γὰρ τὴν ἀνάγκην καὶ οὐ πρὸς τὸ τῆδε βλέπει, οὐδὲ πρὸς ἄλλα ὁ βίος. ἀλλὰ τῇ τῆς φύσεως τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης βίᾳ καὶ τῇ πρὸς τὸ ζῆν τῶν ἄλλων ἢ καὶ αὐτοῦ οἰκειώσει. δοκεῖ γὰρ εὐλογον ἴσως μὴ ἐξάγειν ἑαυτὸν διὰ τὴν οἰκείωσιν ὅτι οὕτως ἐγοητεύθη. In ll. 21–3 one should mentally supply *πράττοι* or something to that effect (cf. l. 4 ὁ δὲ ποιεῖ). The idea is that the contemplative man acts by compulsion but is not enchanted. Armstrong’s translation, following the punctuation of H–S², makes the contemplative man enchanted by this necessity, thereby eliminating the very distinction Plotinus is working to establish. I also believe that Theiler (and following him Henry–Schwyzer, Armstrong, *et al.*) was wrong to delete *ὅτι* in l. 24. I understand ll. 23–5 to be saying that even though we are all compelled by our natural concern for ourselves and others to act in certain ways, this is no reason to commit suicide (in the hope of leaving such concerns behind), because (*ὅτι*) by committing suicide (*οὕτως*) one has been enchanted (*ἐγοητεύθη*). On suicide see *Enn.* 1. 9.*

The important question here concerns the sense in which the contemplative man is not directed to this world. As we saw above, there are two general senses possible. One involved directing his conscious attention to the goings-on in this world, while the other was more normative and amounted to setting one's moral compass by the sensible world, which is to say taking the states of physical well-being to be the *summum bonum*.

The details of 4. 4. 44 strongly suggest that Plotinus has only the latter sense in mind here. He places explicit emphasis on the sage's *life* (*ὁ βίος*, 4. 4. 44. 21) not being directed at other things, and on the sage's being in possession of the correct conception of what is genuinely good, this being different from the object of his practical actions. Finally, we are told that the contemplative man is 'compelled' by his lower soul to perform these actions, and that does not sound at all like automatic action.⁸² So it looks as though what we have here is the more moderate version of compatibility: action is compatible with the contemplative life, but not because one is simultaneously acting and contemplating.

⁸² One might fairly demand to know the sense in which the contemplative man's rational soul is compelled or necessitated by the lower soul here. Often Plotinus writes as if the sage is simply morally obliged to care for bodies and their needs as long as he is in the sensible world (e.g. 4. 3. 12. 6–8; 4. 8. 4. 31–3; 4. 8. 5. 10–14). This might suggest that the sage is obeying a categorical imperative to look after the body and lower soul, yet a categorical imperative would seem to fit rather awkwardly into a teleological philosophical system such as Plotinus'. The sense of necessity might, therefore, be more hypothetical. The actions might be necessary in the sense of constituting conditions that need to be met in order for contemplation to take place. Michael of Ephesus (*In EN* 583. 3–584. 26, esp. 583. 33–4 Heylbut) suggests something along these lines, insisting that the sage should pursue bodily health as necessary and not preferred since a sick body can obstruct contemplation, and it is contemplation which is preferred (cf. Porph. *Abst.* 53. 10–12). Plotinus might want to say something similar here about noble acts of virtue. If the lower soul really is incorrigibly concerned with the welfare of living bodies, it might be counter-productive for the rational soul to deny its urgings completely, since as Plato insisted, suppressing a necessary appetite results in that desire building up and eventually overtaking the soul (*Rep.* 571 E 1–2). Hence, the rational soul would have to perform noble acts of virtue in order to keep the lower soul at least minimally content. Yet Plotinus seems to reject the idea that disturbances in the body will inhibit one's contemplation. In 1. 4 [46]. 4. 25–32, for example, he repeats the position we have found in 4. 4 [28]. 44 that the sage will indeed take care of the body's needs with an attitude of necessity, but here Plotinus makes it clear that the necessity is not hypothetical. Even in times when the body's needs cannot be fulfilled, the sage's contemplation and thus his happiness are not diminished (and cf. 1. 4 [46]. 14. 26–31). Other senses of necessity are surely possible as well. One might, for example, say that these actions are necessary for the sage in the sense that not all the circumstances involved in them are under his control (see Rist, *Road*, 132), but note that this would not explain *why* the sage is performing these actions.

What this discussion of 4. 4. 44 has shown is that despite the arguments in favour of automatic action provided above, Plotinus seems to think that, at the very least, automatic action has its limits. For in 4. 4. 44 we find the contemplative man being *compelled* to practical action by his lower soul and remaining in contemplation only in the more moderate sense of not losing his intelligible ideals. This need not mean that the sage's action is never automatic, but it does strongly suggest that it often is not.

5. Conclusion

What has been shown is that Plotinus' psychology and in particular his account of how the lower parts of soul are formed by and respond to the achievements of the higher parts demand something like automatic action. For any improvement in one level of soul will automatically trickle down to the next level, which is turned to it and formed by it, and in so far as these lower levels of soul are intrinsically concerned with the sensible world, their response will be in the form of sensible activity. Further, Plotinus' account of both crafts and the actions of the heavenly bodies also seems to point in this direction. The contentious question that remains has to do with the extent to which the sage's acts of virtue are performed automatically. For as we have now seen, the sage does not appear to be always acting in an automatic manner, though this need not be at odds with his contemplative life.

However, one could easily raise a number of objections to any account of sagacious virtuous action regardless of the above caveats and limitations. First, according to the metaphysical psychology as described in Section 3, it would seem to be the sensitive soul rather than the rational soul that is responsible for these virtuous actions, and that seems bizarre both because the sensitive soul would turn out to be rather sophisticated and because to the extent that reason is not involved, the actions themselves would be, if not irrational, then at least non-rational. Second, the solemn struggle to determine the right course of action seems to lie close to the core of our ethical experience, and any account that disregards this pensive effort does not really seem to be an account of *ethical* action at all. As Rist remarks, 'the brave man is not an automaton whose reflexes simply

cause him to act bravely'.⁸³ Third, it is audacious enough to say that the sage performs virtuous actions without any deliberation, but this account seems to go even further by suggesting that he is not even *conscious* of any virtuous act that he performs automatically, and surely such blind acts do not deserve to be called virtuous.

These piercing objections swiftly expose to view this account's distance from our modern moral intuitions, but perhaps they overstate the case against automatic action. Surely it must be granted that there is something bizarre about saying that the sage's virtuous actions are executed solely by the sensitive soul. Such a figure would indeed approach Rist's automaton. This characterization, however, draws its force from an oversimplification of Plotinus' psychology. The sensitive soul does not exist in a vacuum, and the sage's sensitive soul in particular is turned to and formed by his rational soul. This means, first of all, that the lower soul is not merely on autopilot nor are these actions merely the result of habituation. That would be a different and lower kind of virtue (at least according to the later discussions of levels of virtue).⁸⁴ The problem, of course, with such habitual virtue is that it lacks understanding. The little boy lets the old woman have his seat in the bus simply because he was brought up that way. He might say and even think that it is a good thing to do, but he does not understand what goodness is. This is not the case with the sage. He does understand what the Good is (or at least virtue at the intelligible level). Moreover, the sage's good actions and his understanding of the Good are not two unrelated phenomena. Even after the training and when reason is not stepping in, there is a sense in which his actions are *flowing* from his understanding. Hence, the sensitive soul is far from being the sole executor of these actions. According to the theory of automatic action, reason is involved in the sage's actions, but in a unique way. Reason does not turn down and attend to the needs of the sensitive soul and body. This, after all, would come at the cost of its contemplation. Rather, the sensitive soul looks up to reason and participates in it, and in this way its activities are informed by reason without reason being distracted.⁸⁵ Does this mean that the sage is completely unconscious of his actions? Probably not. Recall how Tolstoy described Levin's mowing experience also in terms of his being unconscious of the movement. This can hardly mean

⁸³ *Road*, 132.

⁸⁴ e.g. Porph. *Sent.* §32.

⁸⁵ And cf. 4. 4. 12. 1 ff.

that Levin had no idea where he was or that he was mowing. His obliviousness is limited to his technique and the mechanics of his swinging the blade. Such unconsciousness is not a drawback but a consequence of real expertise, be it in craft or in moral behaviour.⁸⁶

In order to illustrate the attractiveness of such a position, consider some case of moral action with a more or less obvious answer: for example, a wealthy man, full from a large lunch, happens to win a large bag of fresh bagels and then on his way out of the restaurant encounters a starving child on the street. Not only is it clear that the man should give some of the bagels to the starving child, but there even seems to be something monstrous about anyone who really has to deliberate about the matter. In such obvious cases—rare but perhaps not as rare as moral sceptics would have us believe—the immediacy with which one responds to the situation is a key ethical element of one's action. And it is perhaps reasonable to expect that for a sage, who really understands what it is to be good, a great part of his ethical life will consist of such obvious cases to which he can provide an immediate correct response. To bring the issue to a point, the modern moral intuition that ethical behaviour must be deliberative is at odds with the intuition (central to virtue ethics) that immediacy is itself essential to many ethical responses. A Plotinian theory of automatic action would side with the latter intuition but without rendering the action irrational in doing so, since reason would still be influential in a non-deliberative manner.

It is perhaps fitting to conclude by reiterating Plotinus' caveat regarding the extent to which human beings can give themselves over to automatic action. As we saw above in the discussion of natural activities, Plotinus underlined a number of critical differences between sublunar living things on the one hand and superlunar living things and the universe on the other, all of which went in the direction of saying that the former simply cannot live in the automatic and carefree manner of the latter. This verdict is echoed in certain other passages. In 3. 2. 14. 16–20, for example, Plotinus declares that human beings will never achieve the zenith of virtue because they are parts.⁸⁷ This is also part of his explanation of the cycle of

⁸⁶ This would also be comparable to the celestial things' awareness of the goings on down here (4. 4. 6–12). See A. Smith, 'Unconsciousness and Quasi-Consciousness in Plotinus', *Phronesis*, 23 (1978) 292–301.

⁸⁷ καὶ ἄνθρωπος δὴ, καθ' ὅσον μέρος, ἔκαστον, οὐ πᾶς. εἰ δέ που ἐν μέρει τι καὶ ἄλλο τι, ὃ οὐ μέρος, τοῦτω καὶ κείνῳ πᾶν. ὃ δὲ καθ' ἑκάστα, ἢ τοῦτο, οὐκ ἀπαιτητέος τέλεος εἶναι εἰς ἀρετῆς ἄκρον· ἥδη γὰρ οὐκέτι ἂν μέρος. This problem of being parts, again, does

life and death, since in his view only death puts us in a position to contemplate in the manner of the World-Soul and celestial things (4. 8. 4. 31–5).⁸⁸ Thus, even the sage—to the extent that the sage really exists and is not merely an ideal—will at times encounter obstacles that draw him out of his contemplative state. When such obstacles are present, the sage will maintain his normative directness to the intelligible world while directing his attention to the sensible world. Just like Levin, when he encounters a tussock, the sage will be forced to deliberate how best to deal with certain situations. The question remains: just how many tussocks will there be in the sage's world?

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not apply to the heavenly bodies on account of their superior physical constitutions (see above).

⁸⁸ And cf. Plotinus' distinction of the four kinds of 'man' in 4. 4. 17. 27–38. I agree with Schniewind (*L'Éthique*, 108) that the description of the highest kind really applies only to the World-Soul (and celestial souls): ἐν δὲ τῷ ἀρίστῳ, τῷ χωρίζοντι, ἐν τῷ ἄρχον, καὶ παρὰ τούτου εἰς τὰ ἄλλα ἡ τάξις· οἷον διττῆς πόλεως οὐσης, τῆς μὲν ἄνω, τῆς δὲ τῶν κάτω, κατὰ τὰ ἄνω κοσμουμένης. This can be understood from the lines that immediately follow: 'But it has been stated that it is in the World-Soul that unity, sameness, and likeness are found, and that in other souls things are different, and the reasons for this have been stated as well.'

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